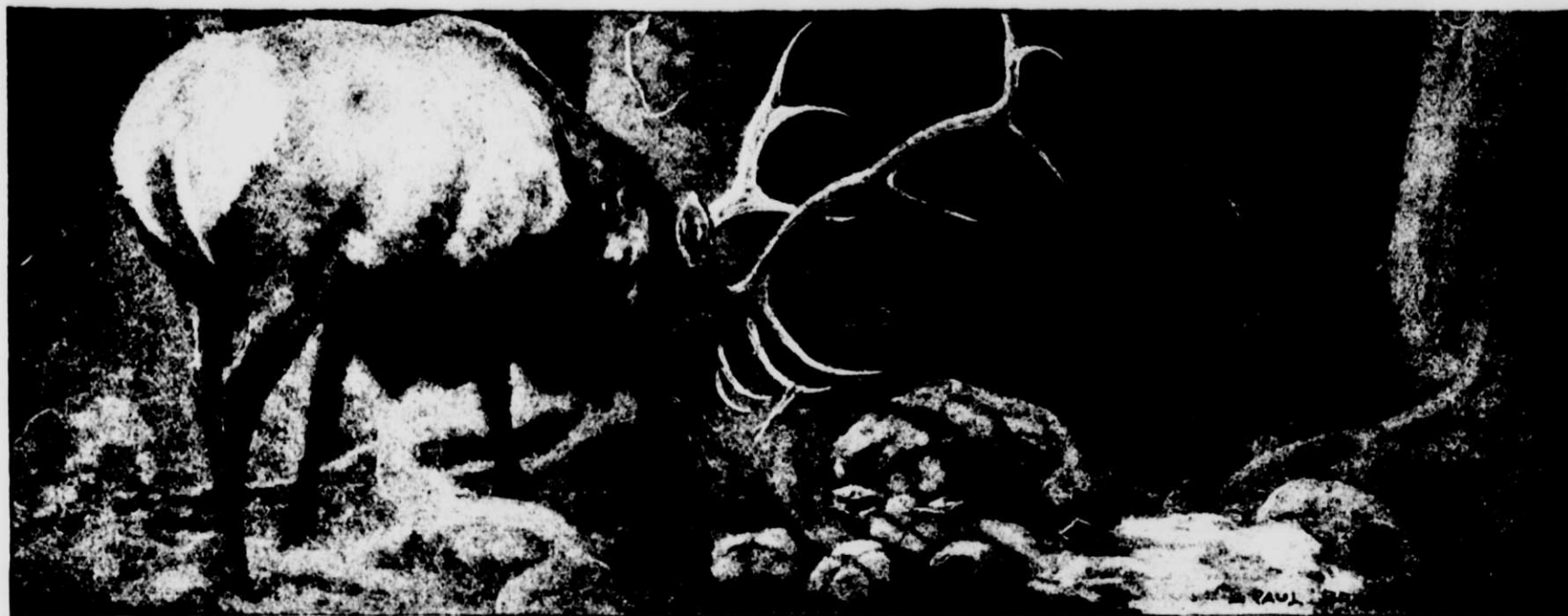


HOOF & CLAW

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It was such sneezing as he had never experienced before

McLaggan stopped short, in the middle of the trail, and peered sharply into the thick undergrowth on his right. At odd moments during the past half hour he had experienced a fleeting sensation of being followed; but, absorbed in his own thoughts, he had paid no attention to it. Now, however, he was on the sudden quite convinced of its reality. Yet he could have sworn he had heard nothing, seen nothing, smelt nothing, to justify the conviction. For nearly half a mile the trail stretched away behind him between the giant trunks and fringing bush-growth—narrow, perfectly straight, completely shadowed from sun and sky, but visible all the way in that curiously transparent glassy gloom of the under-forest world. There was nothing behind him on the trail, at least within a half-mile of him. And the Presence of which he had been warned was very near.

As is so often the case with the men who dwell in the great silences, he was conscious at times of possessing something like a sixth sense, a kind of inexplicable and erratic power of perception which frequently neglected to exercise itself when most needed, but which, when it did consent to work, was never guilty of giving a false alarm. Peering with trained eyes, wise in all wood-craft, through the tangle of the undergrowth, he waited absolutely motionless for several minutes. A little black-and-white woodpecker, which had been watching him, ran nimbly up the mast of a giant pine. Nothing else stirred; and there was no other living creature to be discerned. Yet McLaggan knew his intuition had not fooled him. He knew to a certainty that he was being observed and trailed. He pondered on the fact for a little, and then, muttering to himself, "It's a painter, sure!" he resumed his journey.

McLaggan was not nervous; although for this journey he had left his rifle behind him in camp, and he was aware that a panther, if it meant mischief, was not an adversary to be scorned. But skilled as he was in all the lore of the wilderness folk, he knew that no panther, unless with some bitter wrong to avenge, would willingly seek a quarrel with a man. That powerful and crafty cat, not from cowardice but from sagacity, acknowledges man as its master and is wont to give him a wide berth whenever possible. Another thing that McLaggan knew was that the panther has occasionally a strange taste for following a man in secret, with excessive caution but remarkable persistence, as if to study him and perhaps to find out the causes of his supremacy.

But McLaggan's knowledge of the wild creatures went even further than an acquaintance with their special habits and characteristics. He knew that it was impossible for man to know them thoroughly, because there was always the incalculable element of individuality to make allowance for—an element that delights in confounding the dogmatic assertions of the naturalists. He was sure that the chances were a hundred to one against this unseen pursuer daring to make an attack upon him, or even contemplating such a piece of rashness. But, on the other hand, he recognized that remote hundred-and-first chance.

He adjusted the straps of his heavy pack (the cause of his leaving his rifle behind), so that he could rid himself of it on the instant, if necessary. And he carried loose a very effective weapon, the new axe which he had just bought at the Settlement. It was a light, hickory-handled, general-utility axe, such as any expert backwoodsman knows how to use with swift and deadly effect, whether as a hand-to-hand weapon or as a missile. He was not nervous, as we have seen; but he was annoyed that he, the old trailer of many beasts, should thus be trailed in his turn, from whatever motive. He kept an indignantly watchful eye on all the coverts he passed, and he scrutinized suspiciously every considerable bough that stretched across the trail. He had bethought him that the panther's favored method of attack was to drop upon his quarry's neck from above; and in spite of himself the little hairs on the back of his own neck crawled at the idea.

The trail running in from the Settlement to McLaggan's camp among the foothills was a matter of some fifteen miles, and up-hill all the way. But in that bracing autumn air, amid those crisp shadows flecked with October's gold, McLaggan was little conscious of the weight of his pack, and his corded muscles felt no fatigue. Under the influence of that unseen and unwelcome companionship behind the veil of the leafage he quickened his pace gradually, growing ever more and more eager to reach his rifle and to take vengeance for the troubling of his journey.

Suddenly, from far ahead, the silence was broken by the high, resonant bugling of a bull elk. It was a poignantly musical sound, but full of menace and defiance, and it carried a long way on that still, resilient air. Again McLaggan regretted his rifle; for the virile firmness of that bugling suggested an unusually fine bull and a splendid pair of antlers. McLaggan wanted meat, to be dried for his winter larder; and he wanted the antlers, for a really good elk head was by this time become a thing of price. It was a possession which enthusiastic members of the Brotherhood of the Elks were always ready to pay well for.

THE bugling was several times repeated, at brief intervals; and then it was answered, defiantly, from far on the left. The sonorous challenges answered each other abruptly, and drew together swiftly. McLaggan still further hastened his pace. His gray eyes, under their shaggy brows, blazed with excitement. He forgot all about his unseen, stealthy pursuer. His sixth sense stopped working. He thought only of being in time to see the duel between the two bull elks, the battle for the lordship of the herd of indifferent cows.

To his impatience it seemed no time at all ere the rival buglings came together, and ceased. Then his straining ears caught—very faintly and elusively as the imperceptible airs of the forest drew this way and that—the dry clash of opposing antlers. It was evident that the battle was nearer at hand than he had imagined. He broke into a noiseless trot, hoping yet to be in time.

Presently he was so near that he could catch, amid the clash of antlers, occasional great, windy snortings and explosive, groaning grunts. All at once these noises of battle stopped, changed, passed into a con- (Continued on Page 13)